THE HEART OF THE MATTER

October 21, 1990

8:30 and 11:00 a.m. Worship Services

John M. Buchanan

Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

Scripture
Thessalonians 1:1-10
Matthew 22:34-40

"Love...God with all your heart, soul and mind, and... your neighbor as yourself."

-Matthew 22:37,39(RSV)

"You shall love God with all your heart, soul and mind... and your neighbor as yourself."

It is the heart of the matter. And it is our secret... Three loves: Love of God and neighbor and self.

It is what religion is about. Jesus said it one day near the end, as he was summing up everything. He said it in a way that forever changed the way the world thinks about religion.

It was during the last week, the week we call Holy because it begins with his triumphant entry into Jerusalem and ends with his death on the cross. In between he teaches daily in the Temple. Crowds of people are coming each day to hear what he has to say. That fact alone - that a modern, unknown rabbi from Galilee is upstaging all the official Passover activities such as making sacrifices and buying appropriate animals for the ceremony - has made him notorious in the eyes of the religious and political bureaucracy.

What he says to them makes matters worse. And so the high council in Jerusalem creates a scheme to get rid of him without turning the people against them. They appoint some of their number, lawyers, actually the ones trained in argument, those who can tangle a common person hopelessly in his own words, and they send these men to provoke him, to get him to say something so bizarre, so intemperate, so subversive, that the Romans will step in and arrest him and in their brutally effective way of dealing with troublemakers, crucify him.

So he sits in the Temple every day and crowds gather around to hear what he has to say, and among them are these lawyers with their trick questions; on this day they ask a sequence of three. The first one is about religion and politics, always controversial: "Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar?" The second is about divorce, remarriage and who is the real spouse...? a matter with which lawyers are still fussing.

And then this: "Teacher, what is the great commandment of the law?" It must be a trick. Everybody knows the answer. It's as familiar to them as the opening words of the Gettysburg Address are to us. It's in the Book of Deuteronomy at the beginning of the Law. It's called the Shema and God's people have memorized it, worn it around their wrists and on their foreheads, nailed it to their front doors for several thousand years. "Hear O Israel, the Lord your God is one," the basic theological assertion, the bedrock of Judaism, monotheism, one God. And then, "You shall love God with all your heart, soul and mind." There was no other answer. I'm not sure what they expected him to say. It doesn't seem like a trick question.

But then, having told them what they already knew, he went one better and pulled something out of an obscure corner of the Scripture:

"And you shall love your neighbor as yourself."

They knew that one too. What they had probably never thought of is the relationship between the two commandments to love. Separately they are not unique. Love God. Love neighbor. Together they fundamentally alter the religious landscape.

Jesus puts the command to love neighbor on an equal footing with the basic imperative to love God and suggests that the way to fulfill the first is by doing the second. How, after all, do you go about loving God? Organized religion, of course, never had a shortage of suggestions:

- kill a spotless lamb, or a bull,
  let the blood run down over the altar,
  burn the dead animal.

- abstain from evil, don't kill, steal
  or cheat, obey the religious rules.

- say prayers, sing hymns, go to church,
  perform the religious rituals.

Jesus forever altered the way we think about religion by proposing that the abstract imperative to love God becomes concrete, specific, tangible and doable in the person of the neighbor. Forget the sacrifices, the bloody altars and burning flesh, forget the legalistic moralisms and rigid pieties. Love your neighbor. Who is your neighbor? He answered that in a memorable story about a man set upon by robbers and left to die until rescued by a Good Samaritan. Neighbor is the one who needs you. How? Just like you love yourself. No more. No less.

It is our secret. The good news of God's unconditional love is inseparable from the necessity of putting love to work in the trenches, as it were, in the human relationships which characterize all of our lives. Love God and love neighbor as self.

It seems simple, but it's not. There are complications and the first one is the neighbor. Sometimes he appeals to us, touches our hearts. But sometimes she doesn't. Sometimes the neighbor is obnoxious. Sometimes a

neighbor is to be avoided at all costs. Robert Frost reminded us that a good, stout fence makes good neighbors...

And, after the Birmingham Church bombing which resulted in the deaths of several little children, Martin Luther King said that it's a good thing Jesus didn't command us to like our neighbors.

"Like" is a sentimental and affectionate word. How can we be affectionate to a person who is threatening to kill our children?

"Lover is greater than like," he concluded.

And different. Love, King said, means "creative good will" - and he didn't say, but we know, that may mean not liking the neighbor at all.

And while we're thinking about neighbors, who needs them? The goal of our life seems to be autonomy, individualism, independence.

Lesslie Newbigin who spent most of his career as a missionary and Bishop in India has a fine new book, The Gospel in a Pluralist Society, in which he observes a peculiar similarity between the introspective, meditative religions of the East and modern Western culture. Both, he says, focus almost exclusively on the individual.

In the case of Eastern spirituality, individual autonomy, apart from others, invulnerability, the ability to distance oneself from physical pain by concentrated meditation; or in the case of Western culture, from physical need by surrounding oneself with a mountain of consumer-society gadgets -the goal of both is to isolate and celebrate the individual.

Biblical religion is very different. You can't go it alone in the Bible. You shouldn't. You're not made to go it alone. You are made for relationship, community, mutuality - in a word, for love. Biblical religion wants to make lovers of everybody.

A second problem with loving neighbor as self is the "as self" part.

We have learned all our lives that the self part of us isn't so good. We've been reminded that we are sinners, that a good synonym for sin is selfishness. And, it would seem, love of self is to be avoided, or at least discreetly disguised. What possibly could Jesus have meant?

Fortunately, we've learned what's wrong with the older logic. We know, thanks to the psychologists and psychiatrists, that you can't love God or anybody else for that matter if you have no self-esteem. We know now that if you don't think of yourself as valuable, worthy, loveable, you are condemned to a lifetime of either acting out anger, or pathetically trying to become worthy and valuable and loveable.

We know now the appalling societal consequences when a whole generation of people grow up having been told that they are not valuable, worthwhile... Dr. Barry Brazelton's article in The New York Times Magazine several weeks ago was a tragic retelling of a story we can see every day - of young men and women who are not going to make it because the

clearest word spoken to them from the day of their birth has been spoken in a variety of very effective ways from negligence, to physical violence, to the fact that the schools they attend are underfunded...

"You are not wanted.
You are not important.
You are not worth anything.
You are not loved."

And we also know there is a positive side to the "as self" part as well.

Dr. Bernie Siegel is a surgeon at Yale who spends most of his time with patients who have cancer. He has, over the years, carefully observed the relationship between how one feels about oneself, how one feels about others, and one's physical health. He has written about his experience in several books.

Cancer patients typically come to believe "that there is some terrible flaw at the center of their being, a defect they must hide if they are to have any chance for love." And when people feel unlovable, their ability to love shrivels up. There is nothing more deadly than that, he concludes.

Siegel is convinced that "unconditional love is the most powerful known stimulant to the immune system" and there is evidence that he is right. "If I told patients to raise their blood level of immune globulin no one would know how. But if I teach them to love themselves and others fully, the same changes happen automatically. The truth is: love heals."

A study at the Menninger Foundation added scientific data to the euphoria and aliveness which accompany "being in love." People who are in a loving relationship feel good about themselves and simply feel good. The Menninger people discovered that there are reasons: they have less lactic acid in their blood and so feel less tired; their white cells are more responsive and their endorphin levels increase so they feel less pain.

So maybe we need a whole new way of thinking religiously, a way that encourages us to love the world instead of hating or distrusting the world as religion always does, precisely because we want to love God..., a way that begins with our own worth as children of God and then proceeds to love the neighbor.

God knows the world needs people with hearts big enough to love.

There are ecological and environmental issues confronting us which are so big that until now the best political response we have come up with is to deny that they exist.

There are economic issues confronting our city and our nation that are so big and so complex that the best we can come up with is to put off the resolution until next year.

There are human issues at Cabrini Green so complex and difficult that the best we can do is wring our hands and stop getting off the Kennedy at Division Street.

Sometimes it actually happens. I received a letter earlier this year which you should hear:

> "Dear Dr. Buchanan,
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> I am an Associate Professor at the Chicago City Colleges, Harold Washington.
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> "One of my students wrote a stirring architectural paper about your church. I've forgotten what was detailed about much of the structure, but I still vividly remember what was said of the warmth and caring that was expressed by the congregation.
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> "Later that week this information was shared with another class, to my surprise three members acknowledged that they had received tutoring from your church.
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> "One young man stated he would have become a gang member if it had not been for your service. A young woman said she believed she would have become pregnant thereby thwarting completion of high school and college would have been just a fantasy.
>
> "I am convinced that the Chicago City Colleges have students that are taking courses and succeeding in life due to your persistent care and well conceived and directed programs.
>
> "Please persist in your good works."

The world needs people who know how to love; people who in Jonathan Schell's memorable image, are big and courageous enough to be "universal parents," care givers, and life givers and lovers of the whole world.

It is my belief that it is the vocation of the church and of those of us who wish to be faithful disciples of Jesus Christ to give that to the world - to pour our love into the world in the name of Jesus Christ - to love the world and our neighbor in the world with the same care and stewardship and creativity with which we care for and about ourselves. That's what this church is about.

Now the basic challenge or dilemma is that you can't love God until you love your neighbor and you can't love anybody until you love yourself. And you can't love yourself unless somebody tells you you are lovable, shows you that you are worth loving.

That's what Gospel is... a good word about us... Christianity begins not as a religion, but as good news that we are loved: that the creator of

the universe loves us, intends us, knows us, has given the life of an only son for the sole purpose of showing us how dearly we are loved.

The revolutionary genius of Jesus was in teaching that the way to experience that love, our salvation that is to say, is by expressing it to others. We experience God's love for us as we love neighbors.

It is our vocation to do that for the world: to show the world that there is another way, that it makes a great deal of sense to love by valuing the life of every man and woman and child: the one who works with you or for you, the child in the C.H.A. project, the young man on the street, the young girl trying to decide how to deal with issues of sexuality, your spouse, your friends, to give them the gift of God's love in your love, which in turn, is what they need in order to be lovers too.

It's really what this stewardship business is about. Once a year we ask everybody who is affiliated with this church to make a financial pledge. Every church does it. We spend a lot of time and energy getting ready for it, creating budgets, brochures, materials, making telephone calls. We look carefully at the work the church does in worship, nurture of individuals, education, mission and service to our neighbors, and we look carefully at what it costs to do all these things and then we ask one another to support it.

But it doesn't take very long thinking about it to come to the conclusion that the real issue is the Gospel and our personal response to Jesus Christ. The real issue is not corporate fund-raising, which is really rather uncomplicated, but personal faith. The real issue is that the Christian faith announces God's love and urges our active response. The real issue is that the oldest moral imperative in our tradition - to love God with heart, soul and mind - begins to happen when we affirm the worth, fight for the dignity, work for the rights, care for the needs of our neighbors as we care for ourselves. That is why we dare ask one another to give. It's the heart of the matter.

Jesus summarized the law as love of God and neighbors as self in response to a question, remember. "What is the great commandment?" a lawyer asked him and I concluded, as I thought about this familiar passage, that in the sequence of trick questions, this one was different. The scholars say it was an attempt to entangle and entrap him, but I don't think so. There's no duplicity here. That's what he came for... and he did his job - asked two tough ones and then this, which isn't devious at all.

I think the man wanted to know. He wanted to know because he had tried the formula, had loved God in all the prescribed ways, sacrifices, duty, rules, prayers... and it didn't feel right.

He was missing something. He missed the connection between the love of God, his love for his neighbor and his love for himself. He missed the necessity to love his neighbor and in that process he missed the best part of all.

One of Dr. Siegel's dying patients, put it succinctly: "Death isn't the worst thing. Life without love is far worse." [Love, Medicine & Miracles, p. 179ff]

And years before Dostoevski, "I am convinced that the only hell that exists is the inability to love."

That lawyer 2,000 years ago had not yet heard that he was valuable in God's eyes, the object of God's unconditional love; and because he hadn't heard, his religion and his life was a determined, but joyless effort to get it right.

The question he asked is the religious question. It is our question of course.

He wasn't getting it in the abstract, nor do we.

He wasn't going to know God's love until it began to flow through him - to change the way he thought about himself and the way he acted toward his neighbor.

Jesus made a lover of that man, I like to think. Because of his encounter with the Christ he began actually to like himself and then he began to love his neighbor.

God wants to make a lover out of you.

It is the heart of the matter.

Amen.